

Laurie Baker

(The Telegraph, UK)

Laurie Baker, who died yesterday aged 90, was a provincially-trained British architect whose career was transformed by a chance meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in the 1940s; he spent the rest of his life in India, designing buildings in an exuberantly idiosyncratic style that long pre-empted the modern concept of "eco-friendliness".

Using only local brick and similar building materials, Baker would often add a fantasy of his own, as at his coffee house designed like a helter-skelter in Thiruvananthapuram (formerly Trivandrum), the capital of Kerala. Customers climb a spiral ramp before being seated, and the uniformed waiters travel from kitchen to table via a steep, spiralling slope.

A droll, unassuming man with a handsome grey beard, Baker earned a reputation for designing and building odd-looking but high-quality homes for clients of modest means at what seemed an impossibly low cost. Some were topped by irregular, pyramid-like structures with one side left open and tilting into the wind, funnelling it into the house.

He favoured decorative jali walls, pierced Mughal-style brick screens which allowed natural air movement to cool the interior and create intricate patterns of light and shadow.

"The results," noted the architectural commentator Alan Powers, "are delightful, practical and, in a country where craftsmanship has not yet been systematically effaced, they show exactly the joy in work for the maker and the user that William Morris talked about, combined with low energy consumption in materials and running costs."

As well as Morris, Baker drew inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi, India's political and spiritual leader, whom he met by chance in wartime England, and whose teachings informed his life and work. Gandhi urged Baker to visit rural India once the war was over. This he did, in 1945, and it was Gandhi's spiritual influence that propelled Baker to work initially among leprosy patients.

As far as possible, Baker used methods that were economical and durable, and materials that were locally available and reflected the architecture of the area. Ever frugal, he would often be found rummaging through scrapheaps looking for suitable finds, once recovering an intricately-carved piece of stone which he incorporated

into the entrance to the Chitralekha Film Studio at Aakulam, Trivandrum (1974-76).

Baker's aim was always to enrich the local culture by promoting in his buildings simplicity and a home-grown quality; the poverty he saw around him moved him to emphasise the need for cost-conscious construction and to encourage the local craftsmanship.

With the avuncular air of an absent-minded professor, Baker was a familiar figure on his own building sites, often finalising designs through handwritten instructions to masons and labourers. Indeed, his working methods relied on improvisation, with his initial drawings bearing only an idealised connection to the finished construction, Baker making most of the decisions about accommodation and design on site himself.

His respect for nature, instilled by his Quaker upbringing, guided his on-site improvisations, and he was always loath to disturb original topography or even uproot a tree.

Although Baker's holistic approach to architecture, initially regarded as eccentric, gradually gained wider acceptance, he complained that the "Baker home" style had become a mere regional commodity rather than a solution that might be applied elsewhere.

His coup de théâtre was his Centre for Development Studies, a 10-acre postgraduate campus built in the early 1970s on a hill above Thiruvananthapuram, and which gave full rein to his ingenuity and imagination. Rippling brick walls coil around trees enclosing shady, circular courtyards, a network of raised walkways, roof terraces and an eight-storey library tower.

Throughout his career Baker avoided mainstream commercial architecture. "If you want to mass-produce houses," he observed, "stay away from architects and engineers."

Laurence Wilfred Baker was born into a Quaker family on March 2 1917 in Birmingham, the youngest son of the chief accountant of Birmingham's Gas Distribution Authority. Educated at King Edward's Grammar School, he was groomed for an accountancy career himself, but having, to his father's dismay, listed his interests as sketching and wandering in jungles, trained instead at the Birmingham School of Architecture.

As a Quaker and a conscientious objector in the Second World War, he enlisted in the Friends' Ambulance Unit working in China and Burma before settling in India.

He initially worked as an architect for an inter-denominational leprosy mission, converting or replacing outdated "asylums" formerly used to house the ostracised lepers. Finding his British construction methods unsuited to local conditions, he schooled himself in the vernacular architecture and drew on Indian cultural influences and the needs of the people who used his buildings.

After Indian independence and Gandhi's assassination in 1948, Baker lived in Kerala before marrying and moving to a small village, in Uttar Pradesh, called Pithoragarh on the Himalayan borders of Tibet and Nepal, where he and his Indian wife Elizabeth lived for 16 years. Elizabeth, a trained doctor, provided the villagers with medical care while Baker worked on the design and construction of hospitals and clinics.

More commissions followed as medical professionals realised that their patients' surroundings were as much a part of the healing process as their treatment, and that Baker seemed to be the only architect who cared enough to find out how to build what made them comfortable with those surroundings.

Latterly Baker and his wife returned to Thiruvananthapuram, where he designed his own "organic" house, called The Hamlet, with a pitched tiled roof projecting over the driveway, a round, semi-open-sided reception room, an entire wing to house his books and a tower for his nieces ("The Niecery").

In the 1980s Baker's ideas caught the imagination of a younger, environmentally-aware generation of Indian architects, nearly 100 of whom now work for Costford (the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development), a non-profit organisation that practises Baker's approach. The Centre has built homes for 10,000 poor families, for which it charged no design fee.

In 1988 Baker took Indian citizenship. He lived simply, owning only the house he lived in and, at any one time, no more than four sets of shirts and trousers, all made of handwoven khadi fabric.

In 1990 Baker was honoured with one of India's top civilian awards, the Padmashree. Among many other honours, he received the United Nations Habitat Award in 1992 and, the following year, the International Union of Architects' Award. In 2003 he received another

honorary doctorate from the University of Kerala for his outstanding contribution to architectural learning.

Laurie Baker married Elizabeth Chandy in 1948; she survives him with their two daughters and a son.